Max Bill (1908–1994) was not only a painter, sculptor, architect, designer, graphic designer, and typographer but also a theorist, collector, curator, publicist, teacher, politician, and activist. The formative influence of his work on mid-twentieth century art and design extended far beyond Switzerland.

Bill was a leading proponent of Concrete art. Before his thirtieth birthday, he became one of its most significant theorists, remaining a tireless advocate of the movement for decades. Bill organized exhibitions, authored numerous texts on Concrete art, and exchanged ideas with likeminded colleagues around the world. At the same time, he set standards for design in the graphic arts, product design, and architecture.

In his highly original and multifaceted design practice, Bill synthesized various disciplines and artistic movements. He built a worldwide network of contacts and was committed to an international artistic dialogue throughout his life.

For Bill, design and society were inextricably intertwined, and he was dedicated to their renewal. As an intermediary between generations, he carried the ideas of the European avant-garde to the post-war period, advancing and developing them further. In his work as a designer, he strove for solutions that were at once economic, sustainable, and beautiful. While Bill recognized the potential of the applied arts to improve people’s lives, he thought that the fine arts should serve society’s spiritual needs. His goal was not self-expression but rather logical, straightforward, and harmonious design.
This exhibition traces the development of Max Bill’s career as well as his exchanges with artists at the Bauhaus in Dessau, and in Paris, Zurich, Ulm, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, and the United States.

We are grateful to the max bill georges vantongerloo max bill foundation for its generous support and extend special thanks to Dr. Angela Thomas Schmid and Erich Schmid.

Scenography: ZMIK, Basel
Graphic design: Büro Berrel Gschwind, Basel
In 1927, Max Bill left his silversmith apprenticeship and went to the Bauhaus in Dessau. He wanted to become an architect. Due to a lack of previous knowledge, he began his studies with Josef Albers’s preliminary course. The elective painting courses led by Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky were among the many he attended. After the preliminary course, Bill was assigned to the metal workshop, which was under the direction of László Moholy-Nagy. Later, he participated in the Bauhaus theater. The art of the Bauhaus masters – above all that of Klee, Kandinsky, and Lyonel Feiniger – left clear traces on Bill’s work from that time. At the Bauhaus, he also encountered Constructivist art from Russia and that of the artists’ group De Stijl, which made a lasting impression on him. Bill broke off his studies in the second year. Nevertheless, the progressive spirit of the Bauhaus shaped his career as an architect, designer, sculptor, painter, graphic designer, typographer, and educator. In the 1950s, he sought to establish a contemporary successor to the Bauhaus with the Ulm School of Design. The instructors included former Bauhaus faculty members and students, such as Albers, Helene Nonné-Schmidt, the photographer Walter Peterhans, and Johannes Itten. Over the following decades, Bill maintained contact with many Bauhaus masters, particularly Josef Albers and Wassily Kandinsky, as demonstrated by letters and artworks in Bill’s estate. At a young age, Bill’s ambition was already evident in his participation in numerous competitions. He financed his studies in Dessau partly through prize money from a poster contest he won in 1927. In addition to his Bauhaus classes, Bill took part in three architecture competitions. For example, he created a design for the Swiss National Library in Bern, although he was not able to submit it on time.
focus: paul klee (1879 – 1940)

Bill’s admiration for the oeuvre of Paul Klee is evident in the works he himself created at the Bauhaus. He drew inspiration from Klee’s techniques, pictorial language, and titles. After his time in Dessau, Bill abandoned the visual language of the elder artist. Klee’s art and writings, however, continued to fascinate him. Bill remained in contact with Klee until his death in 1940. Afterward, Bill unsuccessfully sought to publish Klee’s teaching notes, which the latter referred to as the «Theory of Pictorial Configuration.» In texts, interviews, and exhibitions, Bill repeatedly emphasized the central position that Klee held for him as a pioneering artist of the twentieth century.
2 1930 – paris

Back in Zurich, Max Bill extended his network to Paris with the support of Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Hans Arp. He joined the artists’ group Abstraction-Création. In addition to Taeuber-Arp and Arp, Georges Vantongerloo, August Herbin, Antoine Pevsner, Jean Hélion, and many other artists were also members. The group saw itself as the antithesis to Surrealism and advocated for a non-objective Concrete art. It aimed not to make recognizable images but instead to create new images from the pictorial means themselves – point, line, plane, and colour. These contacts markedly influenced the development of Bill’s art toward a non-objective formal language. As early as December 1933 and again in March 1934, Bill was able to exhibit his first non-objective works, such as long sculpture (1933), together with the international avant-garde at Abstraction-Création’s gallery. Over the following years, he cultivated these contacts, organizing exhibitions in Switzerland featuring the work of his artist colleagues alongside his own and promoting their art through publications. With the international support of established artists, he strengthened his own position as well as that of his Swiss compatriots.

In addition to these activities, Bill attempted to establish himself as an architect in Zurich. He primarily earned a living, however, by designing advertisements, in addition to books and exhibitions. In 1936, he designed the Swiss pavilion at the Milan Triennial in fascist Italy. He also wrote his first theoretical essays on Concrete art, including «concrete design» in the catalogue to the exhibition Contemporary Problems in Swiss Painting and Sculpture.
Bill met Sophie Taeuber-Arp during his silversmith apprenticeship at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich. As a juror, she selected some of his student works for the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris. During the 1930s, Bill and Taeuber-Arp’s paths crossed again in Paris. She had a strong network among the European avant-garde and introduced the young Bill to the Paris circles. It was through her that he met Mondrian for the first time, paying him a studio visit. In 1943, during the Second World War, Taeuber-Arp and her husband fled France for Switzerland, where they found temporary shelter with Max and Binia Bill. There, Taeuber-Arp died tragically of carbon monoxide poisoning. Bill’s grief is reflected in the predominantly dark tones of the work *rhythm in four squares*, which was created in the same year.
3 1940 – zurich

During the 1940s, Max Bill consolidated his role as an advocate for the Concrete art movement in Zurich. As early as 1937, he joined Allianz, an association of modern Swiss artists founded by Leo Leuppi and Richard Paul Lohse. Verena Loewensberg and Camille Louis Graeser were also members of Allianz. Soon Bill, together with Lohse and Anton Stankowski, became a driving force in the Zurich art scene. The Concrete artists established themselves as the core of the Allianz, which aimed to organize regular exhibitions in Switzerland. The first one took place in 1938 at the Kunsthalle Basel under the title New Art in Switzerland, with the participation of Bauhaus masters and members of Abstraction-Création, among others. The exhibition unleashed a polemic, in response to which Bill published the wide-ranging article «concrete art.» In order to lend his text the necessary weight, he asked artist friends such as Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, Mondrian, Vantongerloo, Naum Gabo, Pevsner, and Kandinsky for permission to illustrate their works in the article, which also included a photograph of his sculpture endless loop (1935–1937). He thus placed his work in the context of international Concrete art and gave contemporary Swiss art the legitimacy it needed. His lectures on «good design» and «Beauty from Function and as Function» were also controversial. In the 1940s, Bill wrote about Klee, Taeuber-Arp, František Kupka, Pevsner, Mondrian, and Albers, especially for the journal Das Werk.

In 1942, Bill received his first architecture commission for a house that he built in Bremgarten, Aargau, using prefabricated elements. He undertook his first commission as an industrial designer in 1944, when he created a new design for the Patria typewriter. Over the following years, Bill’s involvement with questions of design intensified.
focus: richard paul lohse (1902 – 1988)

Bill met Lohse in Zurich in the 1930s. The two artists had much in common: Both were also active as graphic designers and played important roles in developing the groundbreaking New Graphic Design in Switzerland. They both wrote theoretical texts about Concrete art. Like Bill, Lohse drew inspiration from mathematics and music, although his pictorial means were more austere than Bill’s and he increasingly worked in series. They were also actively involved in organizing exhibitions. Together with Camille Louis Graeser and Verena Loewensberg, Bill and Lohse became known internationally as the Zurich Concretists. After the Second World War, they were the figureheads of the Swiss art scene. From the 1950s on, however, Bill and Lohse’s relationship was increasingly marked by competition and tension.
4 1950 – buenos aires, são paulo, ulm

From the 1940s, Max Bill’s texts on Concrete art were also published in Argentina, where they validated Argentinian artists’ efforts to realize a non-objective art that was also political.

The Museu de Arte de São Paulo held a major solo exhibition dedicated to Bill in 1951. That same year, his sculpture *tripartite unity* (1947/48) was awarded first prize at the São Paulo Biennial. The Brazilian avant-garde took special interest in Bill’s argument that Concrete art represented an advancement of European modernism, using it to further art in their own country. Indeed, discussions on modernization and progress were taking place at that time. Bill travelled to Brazil in 1953 as a juror for the 2nd São Paulo Biennial. Furthermore, he delivered a series of lectures criticizing modern Brazilian architecture as elitist and decorative, which ignited controversy.

In the early 1950s, Bill developed the concept for the Ulm School of Design together with Inge Scholl and Otl Aicher. One focus was an international orientation for the school’s faculty and student body alike. Bill resumed much of the Bauhaus curriculum and invited former professors and students as visiting lecturers. He designed the architecture for the campus, which officially opened in 1955. Some Brazilian artists, including Mary Vieira, Almir Mavignier, and Alexandre Wollner followed Bill to Ulm. During this period, Bill also designed a series of furniture. In 1957, after only two years, he left the school because his views differed from the rest of the staff.
In 1960, Bill organized a wide-ranging retrospective in Zurich entitled *Concrete Art – 50 Years of Development*, to which he also invited many Latin American artists. Through the internationalism of the artists represented, Bill legitimized Concrete art across the globe. In Western Europe and in the United States, however, Concrete art held a more tenuous position vis-à-vis abstract gestural art such as Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism.

**focus: tomás maldonado (1922 – 2018)**

The Argentinian artist Tomás Maldonado visited Bill in Zurich in 1948. Their meeting led to an intensive theoretical exchange. Maldonado then became an intermediary, disseminating Bill’s thought in Argentina. He published numerous texts on Bill in Argentinian journals and edited the first monograph on Max Bill in 1955. In addition to an introduction by Maldonado, it included texts by Bill in German, Spanish, French, and English. Bill invited Maldonado to teach at the Ulm School of Design. When it came to discussions about the direction and basis of teaching at the school, the two were adversaries. While Bill advocated for an aesthetic and purpose-driven design, most of the faculty, including Maldonado, favoured a scientific approach.
Mary Vieira was one of the first women students at the Ulm School of Design. She had studied art in Belo Horizonte. After she saw Bill’s exhibition at the Museu de Arte de Saõ Paulo, she wrote to Bill and told him in November 1951 that she wanted to come to Switzerland. Bill found lodgings for Vieira and employed her at his architecture firm before she attended the school’s preliminary course in 1953. She returned to Switzerland in 1954, where she became an important proponent of both kinetic art and Swiss poster design. That year, Bill invited her to participate in the final exhibition of the artists’ group Allianz. Additionally, he exhibited one of her sculptures at the Swiss national exposition in Lausanne in 1964.
In 1961, Max Bill was named head architect for the design sector at Expo 64, the Swiss national exposition in Lausanne. Alongside architectural projects, Bill dedicated himself to his artistic endeavours during this period. He was intensely preoccupied with the role of the square in painting during these years, as was Josef Albers in the series *Homage to the Square*. During his sojourns in the United States, Bill paid repeated visits to Albers, who taught at Yale University in New Haven. Bill also stayed in touch with other Bauhaus contacts who had immigrated to the United States before the Second World War, including László Moholy-Nagy and Walter Gropius, who gave the opening speech at the Ulm School of Design as a member of its board of trustees. Earlier, in 1939, Bill had toyed with the idea of immigrating to the United States and had taken English lessons. In the 1960s, Bill often travelled to the United States, where he expanded his network and delivered lectures.

Staempfli Gallery in New York held Bill’s first solo exhibition in the United States in 1963, which prompted a review from the Minimal artist Donald Judd. Bill’s search for reduced form also drew the interest of other Minimal artists, such as Carl Andre and Richard Serra. The latter gave a two-part steel sculpture to the Swiss artist for the Haus Bill, which was built in 1967. Andy Warhol made numerous portraits of Bill and the two once traded a portrait for a painting. In addition to solo exhibitions in Chicago and San Francisco, Bill’s networking in the United States led to an important traveling exhibition in 1974, with stations in Buffalo, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.
focus: donald judd (1928–1994)

When Donald Judd reviewed Bill’s 1963 exhibition at Staempfli Gallery in New York, he demonstrated enthusiasm for the sculptures. By contrast, his commentary on the «capable» paintings was lukewarm. After the Second World War, New York established itself as the new centre of the art world with movements such as Abstract Expressionism and, later, Minimal Art. To present their own work as novel and American, some artists downplayed the importance of European art, as did Judd in the 1960s. In a 1964 interview, he stated that he was not interested in European art and that its time had passed.

Bill went on to acquire two works by Judd from a 1973/74 exhibition at Annemarie and Gianfranco Verna’s gallery in Zurich. In the 1980s, Bill and Judd got to know and appreciate one another. They met several times in Switzerland.
Until his death in 1994, Max Bill was the subject of numerous exhibitions and won many prizes and commissions for public sculptures at home and abroad. He delivered lectures on design and society worldwide. In 1993, he was awarded the Praemium Imperiale for Sculpture in Tokyo. His decades-long networking and untiring promotion of Concrete art and «good design» seem to have paid off. Prominent works by Bill in the public sphere include the sculpture *continuity* outside of Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt, the *monument for albert einstein* in Ulm, the *picture columns* in Munich and Berlin, the *pavilion sculpture* in Zurich, the *endless staircase: monument for ernst bloch* in Ludwigshafen, the *spatial cross in 12 equal parts* in Utrecht, the *construction from three equal plates* in Winterthur, and *rhythm in space* at the European Patent Office in Munich.
Bill solidified his friendships with other artists by organizing exhibitions in Switzerland and writing publications. Through articles, publications, and exhibition designs, Bill surrounded himself with names like Hans Arp, František Kupka, Antoine Pevsner, Piet Mondrian, Josef Albers, Georges Vantongerloo, and Wassily Kandinsky – pioneers of modern art in whose ranks Bill placed himself. Additionally, Bill often designed the exhibition posters and catalogues and wrote texts for the exhibition catalogues. In 1936, his text «concrete design» was published in the catalogue for the exhibition *Contemporary Problems in Swiss Painting and Sculpture* (1936) and in 1949, «the mathematical approach in contemporary art» was printed in the journal *Das Werk* as well as in the exhibition catalogue *Antoine Pevsner – Georges Vantongerloo – Max Bill*. Shortly thereafter, in 1950, it appeared in Spanish in the Argentinian art journal *Ver y Estimar*. Articles by Bill came out in other Argentinian and Brazilian journals, leading to the dissemination of his thought on Concrete art in these countries.
7 film

Max Bill – the master’s vision
2008, Ariadnefilm GmbH: Erich Schmid
Duration: 94 Min.
Beginning: 10:30 (D/e) / 12:05 (D/f) / 13:40 (D/i) / 15:15 (D/e)

additional exhibition

«ästhetik des einfachen –
max bill und die hochschule für gestaltung ulm»
11.12.2021–09.01.2022
Forum, Zentrum Paul Klee
biography

1908 Born on 22 December in Winterthur, the son of Alfred Erwin Bill und Marie Bill-Geiger.

1924 Joins Zurich school of applied art as an apprentice silversmith.

1925 Visits the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris, where some of his student works are exhibited. Wins 1st prize in the poster competition for Suchard’s 100-year anniversary.

1927 Starts studying at the Bauhaus in Dessau. After the foundation course, takes part in the metal workshop, the Bauhaus theatre and free painting classes. Enters architecture competitions. Founds gruppe z along with other students.

1928 Termination of studies and return to Zurich.

1929 Foundation of the association die augen (the eyes) with the Zurich artist Hanns Welti.

1930 Joins the Swiss Association of Craftsmen. Trip to Paris, first contact with avant-garde artists.

1931 Marries the cellist and photographer Binia Spoerri.

1936 Designs the Swiss section of the Triennale in Milan, awarded the Gran Premio. Collaborates and participates in the exhibition Zeitprobleme in der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik in Kunsthaus Zurich, with the essay «konkrete gestaltung» (concrete design) in the catalogue.

1937 Joins the artists’ association Allianz.


1941 Foundation of the Allianz-Verlag publishing company.


1944 Organization of the exhibition konkrete kunst in the Kunsthalle Basel with artists from his network, including Hans Arp, Wassiliy Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Georges Vantongerloo, as well as his own works. His first commission as product designer with the Patria typewriter. Teaching at Zurich school of applied arts.
1947  First work in the public space with *kontinuität* in Zurich, which is destroyed the following year in an act of vandalism.

1949  Installation of the travelling exhibition *Die gute Form*. Publication of his essay «schoenheit aus funktion und als funktion» (beauty out of function and as function) in *Das Werk*. His painting is awarded the Prix Kandinsky. Publication of his monograph on Robert Maillard.

1950  Design of the timetable for the School of Design in Ulm (HfG Ulm) and planning of the new school building.

1951  First retrospective in the Museum de Arte São Paulo (MASP). First prize at the first Biennale in São Paulo for his sculpture *dreiteilige Einheit* (three-part unit).

1953  Opening HfG Ulm, which Bill runs as rector, and which is distinguished by an international teaching and student body. Lecture tour in Brazil and Aspen, Colorado, trip to Peru, where he meets the former Bauhaus teachers Josef and Anni Albers.

1955  First monograph on Max Bill published by Tomás Maldonado in Buenos Aires in four languages. Opening of the new building of HfG Ulm.

1960  Bill retrospectives in Stuttgart und Winterthur. Conception of the exhibition *konkrete kunst. 50 jahre entwicklung* (concrete art. 50 years of development) in Helmhaus Zürich with international participants.


1974–75  Retrospective in the USA in various locations.

1977  Eduard Hüttinger’s monograph on Max Bill.

1983  Construction of the *pavillon-skulptur* on Bahnhofstrasse in Zürich.

1991  Marries the art historian Angela Thomas.

1993  Award of the Praemium Imperiale for sculpture in Tokyo.

1994  Honorary doctorate from ETH Zürich; outlines the first ideas for his own museum. Max Bill dies in Berlin on 9 December.
Begleitprogramm

Sonntag 24. Oktober 2021 15:00  
Max Bill als Aktivist und Politiker  
Gespräch in der Ausstellung mit Angela Thomas Schmid, Kunsthistorikerin, Witwe von Max Bill, und Erich Schmid, Filmemacher und Autor

Sonntag 07. November 2021 11:00  
Typografie – Max Bills Rolle bei der Entwicklung eines schweizerischen Exportschlagers  
Gespräch in der Ausstellung mit Robert Lzicar, HKB, Co-Koordinator «Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited», und Fabienne Eggelhöfer, Chefkuratorin Zentrum Paul Klee

14:00 Was bleibt von der «guten Form»?  
Podiumsdiskussion mit Daniel Aeschbacher, HSLU – Design & Kunst, Minou Afzali, HKB, und Claudia Mareis, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, über die Aktualität von Max Bill  
Moderation: Robert M. Stutz, Berner Design Stiftung

Samstag 06. November 2021 11:00  
Möbeldesign heute  
Gespräch in der Ausstellung mit Moritz Schmid, Möbeldesigner, und Renate Menzi, Museum für Gestaltung, Zürich

Sonntag 07. November 2021 12:30  
Kommunikationsdesign – über die Herausforderung, Zahlen, Daten und Statistiken darzustellen  
Gespräch in der Ausstellung mit Barbara Hahn und Christine Zimmermann, Hahn+Zimmermann GmbH
Sonntag **21. November 2021** 17:00
**Hommage à Max Bill**

Samstag **04. Dezember 2021**
Sonntag **05. Dezember 2021**
11:00–17:00 Werkstatt im Forum **Markt der Möglichkeiten – Material nachhaltig genutzt**

Sonntag **12. Dezember 2021** 15:00
**«ich baue volumina» – Architekt im internationalen Kontext**
Gespräch in der Ausstellung mit Angela Thomas Schmid, Kunsthistorikerin, Witwe von Max Bill, und Sabina Tenti, gta Archiv der ETH Zürich

**Digitale Angebote**

Mittwoch **29. September 2021** 17:30
**Kunst am Abend**
Zoom-Führung mit Präsentation von Werken aus der Ausstellung mit Dominik Imhof, Leiter Kunstvermittlung Zentrum Paul Klee

Donnerstag **14. Oktober 18:00**
**International Dialogues in Experimental Design**
In Zusammenarbeit mit dem Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)
Eine internationale Zoom-Diskussion zu experimentellen Schulen für Kunst und Design in Europa und Lateinamerika, in englischer Sprache
Freitag 12. November 2021  
17:00  
**Bildelektüre**  
Zoom-Führung mit Präsentation zu einem ausgewählten Thema der Ausstellung mit Andreas Jahn, Kunstvermittler Zentrum Paul Klee

Dienstag 14. Dezember 2021  
17:00  
**Kunst und ich**  
Zoom-Führung im Dialog mit den Teilnehmer:innen rund um ein Werk der Ausstellung mit Ramona Unterberg, Kunstvermittlerin Zentrum Paul Klee

Führungen durch die Ausstellung  
Samstags 15:00  
**Öffentliche Führungen**  
Sonntags 13:30  
**Öffentliche Führungen**

Dienstags 12:30 – 13:00  
**Kunst am Mittag**

**Fremdsprachige Führungen**  
Französisch, Englisch, Italienisch, siehe zpk.org

Mittwoch 22. September 2021  
14:00  
**Einführung für Lehrpersonen**  
Mit Dominik Imhof, Leiter Kunstvermittlung Zentrum Paul Klee
Freitag/Samstag
29./30. Oktober 2021 13:30
Fernwehfestival 2021
Mit Max Bill um die Welt
Auf den Spuren des Schweizer Künstlers, Designers, Grafikers und Architekten, dessen Einfluss rund um den Globus reichte

Sonntag 31. Oktober 2021
15:00
Kunst und Religion im Dialog
Beat Allemand, Reformierte Kirchgemeinde Münster, im Dialog mit Fabienne Eggelhöfer, Chefkuratorin Zentrum Paul Klee

Samstag 13. November 2021
13:00
Sinn-Reich
Eine alle Sinne ansprechende Führung für Gäste mit und ohne Behinderung. Mit Gebärdensprachdolmetscher:in und induktiver Höranlage

Kunstvermittlung für Familien
16.09.21 – 09.01.22
Interaktive Ausstellung «formenspiel»
Kreativer Brückenschlag von den Ateliers des Kindermuseum Creaviva in die Ausstellungen des Zentrum Paul Klee

Dienstag bis Freitag
14:00/16:00
Samstags und sonntags
12:00/14:00/16:00
Offenes Atelier im Kindermuseum Creaviva Einstündige Workshops zu einem monatlich wechselnden Thema in Verbindung mit den Ausstellungen im Zentrum Paul Klee

Sonntags 10:15 – 11:30
Familienmorgen
In der Ausstellung und im Atelier des Kindermuseum Creaviva für die ganze Familie

Samstags 09:30 – 11:45
Kinderforum
Der Creaviva-Kinderclub ab 7 Jahren
The Zentrum Paul Klee is open to all and offers inclusive events.

Zentrum Paul Klee

Monument im Fruchtland 3
3006 Bern
Tel +41 (0)31 359 01 01
info@zpk.org
www.zpk.org

Opening hours
Tuesday – Sunday 10:00 – 17:00

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